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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBAI 006301

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TAGS: [PINR](#) [ECPS](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [IR](#) [TC](#)  
SUBJECT: SABA TV TO AIR FIRST PROGRAM AS EARLY AS 21 DECEMBER  
(C-TN5-01220)

REF: DUBAI 5636

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L. Davis, Consul General, Dubai, State  
Department.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d), (e)

1.(C) SUMMARY: Plans for Saba, a satellite television network to be launched by former Iranian presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi appear to be moving ahead, with various reports suggesting it may begin airing from Dubai as early as December 21. Iranian filmmaker Behruz Afkhami is reportedly working in Dubai to set up the station with 20 million dollars in start-up funds. Some believe the most important function of Saba lies in setting a precedent for others to follow. The intended content of the station remains unclear. END SUMMARY

Saba's Start Date Unknown  
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2.(C) Saba, the satellite television network that is reportedly on the verge of being launched (reftel) by former Iranian presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi appears to be moving forward, with various reports suggesting it will begin airing from Dubai as early as December 21, 2005. Nassar Hadian, an Iranian political scientist, told PolEconChief December 2 that Saba will broadcast during the Longest Night Holiday (Shab-e-Yalda), December 21. Mohammad Javad Haqshenas, managing editor of National Trust newspaper, named the same date in an interview with ISNA December 12. Ali Reza Nourizadeh, a prominent Iranian journalist based in London, on the other hand, told PolEcon section on December 11 that Saba will begin airing in approximately two months.

Setting Up the Network  
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3.(C) Nourizadeh claimed that an unnamed wealthy Iranian friend of Karroubi who lives in Dubai is funding Saba. Saba has 20 million dollars of capital funds, with 40 million more pledged. Nourizadeh confirmed press reports indicating that Behruz Afkhami, an Iranian filmmaker, was working in Dubai to set up the station. According to Nourizadeh, Afkhami recently asked Dubai-based Al Arabiya Television for assistance with news and footage. He was reportedly told that formal cooperation would not be possible, but that Al Arabiya would consider assistance on a case-by-case basis. Afkhami told ISNA in early September that Saba will initially broadcast only three hours a day. An article published in Shargh, a Tehran-based newspaper, in

mid-November, claims Saba will be based in Dubai Media City, but we have not been able to confirm this.

#### A Watershed Event

4.(C) There is general agreement that a privately owned Iranian broadcasting entity based in the region -- particularly if it received sought-after government authorization -- would be a watershed event. Approval for a station broadcasting via satellite would be doubly noteworthy, since satellite dishes remain outlawed in Iran. Hadian told PolEconChief it did not much matter what the content of Saba might be; the significance would be the precedent set, which could pave the way for other private broadcasters. He also thought many Iran-based artists and journalists not willing to work with state-run broadcasting would seek to work with Saba, potentially leading to a quality of programming that could exceed other television stations based outside Iran. Afkhami himself told ISNA in September that Saba might pave the way for other television channels. The Islamic Iran Participation Front and Iranian Hizballah both subsequently announced their intent to establish satellite stations to grant wider dissemination to their views, according to a September editorial in Farhang-e-Ashti, a Tehran-based newspaper.

#### What Karroubi Is About

5.(C) Beyond a planned "CNN-like" format, little is being said by our contacts about the nature of the station. In the media, Karroubi has been described both as someone who is "not seeking to destabilize the regime," and as a reformer unhappy with the status quo. Karroubi was quoted in Shargh in mid-November, as claiming a commitment to the system of the Islamic Republic and the ideals of Khomeini; in December, however, Karroubi promised (according to a Hemayat article) to name individuals who he believes have monopolized the reform movement and are responsible for its current status. He has also repeatedly said a primary reason for Saba's creation was to provide greater

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voice to the reform movement (hence the location outside Iran). Nourizadeh, who is pessimistic about Saba's chances of success, sums up what is most anticipated about Saba's first broadcast: "at least we will know what Karroubi is about."

16. (SBU) The Hemayat article mentions Karroubi's denials that he intends to run in the 2006 elections for the Assembly of Experts, but states that his new political party, National Trust, does intend to put forward candidates. If/when his station does go on the air, it will likely be used to influence -- and possible to overtly campaign in -- this very important election.

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